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Article

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Editorial: Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives: the proactive application of strategic decision making

The origins of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs can be traced to the mid-1960s and were based on the idea that, in both public and private sectors, an organization's membership should reflect the demographics (e.g. race and gender) of the broader population (Krislov, 1974; Golden, 2024; Maroof & Kapate, 2023). References to “systemic racism” in the business community, along with society in general, have increased exponentially since the 2020 death of George Floyd – leading to a surge in espoused activism which included self-examinations of possible racial biases inherent to corporate culture. In response, Fortune 1000 companies pledged \$340bn toward DEI initiatives between 2022 and 2024 (Thornton, 2024), increasing the number of Chief Diversity Officers by roughly 170% during the same time span (Ellis, 2025).

On January 20, 2025, USA President Donald J. Trump issued an executive order ending funding for and implementation of DEI programs within the federal government, along with the dismantling of any offices which oversaw any of these programs (Executive order, 2025). As of January 2025, 30 states have already banned or have legislation aimed at banning DEI programs (Adams & Chiwaya, 2024), with more expected to follow. These federal and state actions, combined with the 2023 Supreme Court ruling which mandated that colleges and universities could no longer take race as a consideration in admission decisions has led to a multitude of large corporations such as Walmart, Harley Davidson, Loews, Meta, McDonalds and Fort to terminate or drastically reduce their DEI initiatives (Associated Press, 2025; Meyersohn, 2024). Even the stalwart Society for Human Resource Management has recently dropped “equity” from their mission statement (Callaham, 2024).

Our purpose of this editorial and theoretical offering is not to debate the importance of DEI initiatives but rather how to properly formulate and implement these policies so that they can be most effective. The importance of embracing ideals of DEI within the workplace serves not just as a catalyst for social justice. Rather, the ideals of DEI enable stronger organizational cultures, increase the potential contribution of all members and boost organizational effectiveness. Effective DEI programs decrease the potential for expensive litigation and damage to an organization's reputation.

Unfortunately, though often well-intended, espoused (and implemented) DEI initiatives often fail to attain their intended outcomes. While some question the necessity of DEI initiatives all together, others see their importance but are frustrated by the lack of impactful results found after years of DEI attempts (Banaji & Dobbins, 2023) but still see DEI initiatives as being a “good thing” (Minkin, 2023). This paper adopts the latter viewpoint and explores the various aspects of DEI programs and initiatives and how they can be improved. Working from the core belief that with proper implementation, DEI programs provide great benefit to society, we begin by discussing various approaches used in defining diversity, including inherent versus acquired traits and surface versus deep traits. The following two sections focus on the multiple ways in which DEI initiatives can result in both intended and unintended consequences and outcomes. To protect against some of these



unintended consequences, we conclude by proposing the use of multiple strategic decision-making approaches (devil's advocacy, dialectical inquiry, parallel thinking and project premortem), to increase the likelihood of the success of DEI initiatives.

Approaches to defining diversity

Though it may seem rather simplistic, a baseline problem with DEI initiatives is omitting the basic principles of what DEI actually means, both in the macro/societal sense as well as to the organization itself. As a result, the initiative is viewed as being ineffective because the foundation for the initiative is unclear or omitted entirely. Having an understanding of diversity sets the foundation for the embracement of DEI, both in the correct context as well as its appropriate location within the organization.

Defining diversity

Most approaches to DEI take what is called an *inherent approach* (traits with which one is born), an approach that can lead to a focus on simply numbers rather than impact. While having earlier existed in concept, Affirmative Action was first implemented by President John F. Kennedy through an executive order in 1961. Although its original intent was to prevent discrimination, the concept has been interpreted as a necessity for "quotas" based on demographic categories. Reflected by the hundreds of lawsuits challenging Affirmative Action, the use of the inherent approach can lead to feelings of discrimination by those who are not members of the targeted groups have dramatically increased given the 2023 USA Supreme Court decision which deemed the race conscious admissions policies of Harvard College and The University of North Carolina as unconstitutional.

An alternate approach to defining diversity is through the *acquired approach*. Many authors have addressed the multidimensional nature of how individuals are different from each other which has important implications for organizations striving to increase the effectiveness of their DEI programs. For example, [Tasheva & Hillman \(2019\)](#) focused on three dimensions of diversity: human capital, social capital and demographic diversity. *Human capital diversity* represents one's skills, knowledge and expertise which is typically the result of their educational background, work experience, etc. *Social capital diversity* refers to the resources and opportunities that become available through an individual's network of relationships. *Demographic diversity* includes observable attributes such as age, gender, race and so on.

Similarly, research has explored the performance implications of two kinds of diversity – *inherent* and *acquired* ([Hewlett et al., 2013](#)). The former represents traits gained by experience and the latter involves traits with which one was born such as gender, ethnicity and race. A representative study of 1,800 individuals, along with 40 case studies and numerous interviews and focus groups, found that companies whose leaders exhibited at least three inherent and three acquired traits (termed two-dimensional diversity) enjoyed superior market share gains and more successful entrance into new markets.

A recent article by [Waldman & Sparr \(2023\)](#) provides a similar, yet subtly different view of diversity. Here, diversity is viewed from the context of being surface level, elements which are easily viewed or articulated such as race, gender, or age, or being deep-level, which includes experiences, educational background and attitudes. With diversity management being historically introduced to address gender and racial inequities, surface-level elements tend to be the salient elements used within organizations. This becomes problematic in that the use of surface-level elements has been shown to lead to feelings of discrimination and "tokenism" rather than improved value and belonging. Incidentally, the idea of affirmative action has been incorrectly linked to this notion of surface-level or

identity elements being used in organizational decisions. As affirmative action is not about final outcomes but rather opportunity (Foley & Williamson, 2018), the use of surface-level identity elements within any organizational decision runs counter to the benefits intended by diversity management.

Embracing diversity

When considering diversity, there are – and should be – a multitude of characteristics considered. While race is often a starting point of discussions, there are a multitude of individual factors that can contribute to the overall idea of diversity, including gender, sexual orientation, ageism, social status, ethnicity, religion and alternative abilities. When a central factor in addressing team composition is based only on race or gender, the potential benefits of diversity may be eroded (Avery, Ruggs, Garcia, Traylor, & London, 2023). For example, focusing on only one dimension may exclude valuable contributions that someone may confer based on their unique past experience, social network, or other demographic factors that they exhibit, such as age or ethnic background.

Another issue that complicates the potential benefits of diversity in teams is the countervailing influences that are inherent because of information processing and social categorization theories (Tasheva & Hillman, 2019). That is, information processing scholars would argue that variation in team composition tends to lead to an increase in information, knowledge and perspective. This, in turn, improves how information is processed and decisions are made. In contrast, categorization theory suggests that people categorize dissimilar others as “outgroup members” and, hence, diversity may disrupt the ability of teams to function because of communication difficulties, conflict and lower cohesion. As the authors note, “when and how the cognitive benefits may outweigh the social categorization costs of diversity remains one of the fundamental questions for team effectiveness” (2019: 747).

It is important to recognize that caution must be exercised when associating DEI initiatives with a firm’s economic outcomes. As noted by Lorenzo & Reeves (2018), measuring the connection between the diversity actions and the bottom line can be ambiguous and/or difficult to define. First, many factors can explain firm performance (e.g. products-markets, industry-level profits, overall economic conditions, etc.). Thus, as a practical matter, it is hard to tease out the direct economic benefits of diversity policies and actions. Second, there is the issue of causality. As suggested by Bourgeois, organizational slack serves as a resource that can enable:

[...] an organization to adapt successfully to internal pressures for adjustment or to external pressures for changes in policy, as well as to initiate changes in strategy with respect to the external environment (Bourgeois, 1981: 30).

Clearly, firms with higher levels of financial performance would be more likely to have the resources available (as opposed to firms that are having liquidity and solvency issues) to invest in more strategic initiatives, including those directed at addressing DEI matters. Consequently, such investments may be correlated with economic outcomes – but the issue of causality becomes problematic and is often not considered.

As previously stated, diversity management is something best managed within the opportunity, or recruitment, phase rather than the decision phase. Thus, diversity management is something that must be actively pursued by the organization rather than depending on candidates/clients to be sufficiently diverse. Said otherwise, it is up to the organization to develop diversity management plans in which they actively recruit diverse candidates rather than simply picking the most “diverse” candidate out of the pool.

This same proactivity is also essential to the proper use of equity and inclusion within the organization. Equity is attached to the manner in which people are treated and therefore can only be achieved by continual evaluation and reflection on the way people within the organization, be they minority or majority, are being treated. Likewise, inclusion is something that must be a foundation of treatment, which allows all members of the organization the same access to success and belonging based on the parameters of their roles within the organization. Both ideals are deeply rooted in the foundation of equity theory on which the *perception* of fairness is key and that people are only motivated to work fairly when they feel that their efforts and contributions are valued in the same way as their peers (Adams, 1965). Having a DEI initiative that is solely dependent on hiring practices is doomed to failure, as it is not truly embracing any of the actual ideals of equity and inclusion nor considering the perceptions of treatment of those within the organization.

Potential outcomes of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives

DEI initiatives cannot be one-size-fits-all and it is imperative that those creating such programs cater to the unique aspects of their organization (Avery *et al.*, 2023; Burnett & Aguinis, 2023). Even with the best of intentions, the outcomes of DEI programs may or may not ultimately benefit the organization. Here we discuss both the intended and unintended consequences of DEI programs.

Intended consequences

The intended outcomes of DEI initiatives include progress toward one or more of three goals: enhanced representation of targets, smaller gaps in career success between targets and nontargets and further inclusion of targets, i.e. evidence that they are well integrated and valued in an organization (Leslie, 2019). Diversity initiatives generally tend to target ethnic/racial minorities and women; however, they can also target other disadvantaged groups.

There are three broad categories of DEI practices (Leslie, 2019). First, *non-discrimination policies include merit-based decision-making and diversity training*. Here, for example, an organization would endeavor to educate employees about bias and disadvantages faced by targets and provide strategies for preventing bias, which may lead to discrimination. To illustrate, consider Tony Bates, CEO of Genesis, a \$1.4bn American software company, who was concerned about how to create a more inclusive culture among his 5,500 employees (Prince, 2021). During the social unrest of the summer of 2020, Bates struggled to find the right words to communicate his firm's stance on racial injustice. He started by sending a companywide email letting everyone know that the company was evaluating its own diversity practices to assess what additional measures could be taken. Bates followed up this commitment with a town hall during which employees from different racial backgrounds shared stories about racial injustices that they experienced growing up. This served to help him foster a more inclusive culture and to encourage underrepresented employees to share their experiences and receive the appropriate support.

Second, *resource practices include preferential treatment, targeted recruitment, diversity statements and diversity networking and mentoring programs*. These practices would, in part, help an organization to increase access to and the attractiveness of jobs and promotion opportunities among targets. For instance, Natalie Carter, a senior associate at the international Greenberg Traurig law firm, claims that it is not enough to focus on hiring from traditionally underrepresented groups in the legal industry. Instead, she argues:

We also need to ensure that ethnic minority lawyers are being retained and promoted by their firms [...] we need to be honest about why the culture in many firms is not inclusive (Carter, 2021: np).

Third, *accountability practices include diversity plans, performance evaluations and positions as well as grievance systems*. This would include evaluating managers' performance in terms of achieving diversity goals and offering rewards (or punishments) in terms of how they perform. Nike, for example, has historically and recently been publicly criticized for not doing enough to address racial and societal issues (Murray, 2020). Some Nike employees complained that there were fewer advancement opportunities for Black employees, as well as the tendency for Black shoppers to be profiled at Nike stores. Nike's board responded by making a commitment to undertake some tangible changes such as Nike's CEO and other executives' long-term compensation bonuses will now incorporate diversity goals to improve Nike's racial diversity by 2025. The intended outcome is to ensure that Nike's top executives are themselves committed to racial justice, as missing targets could lead to a six- or seven-figure loss in compensation.

Evidence supports the idea that sound diversity practices can lead to higher performance. For example, McKinsey & Company found that firms in the top quartile for gender diversity at the executive level were 21% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the bottom quartile (Florentine, 2019). And, regarding ethnic and cultural diversity, companies in the top quartile are 31% more likely to have above-average profitability than those in the bottom quartile. Flammer, Hong, & Minor (2019) find further evidence of the relationship between effective diversity practices and firm performance. They found that tying CEO pay to social objectives is an effective mechanism to enhance racial diversity within companies but also benefits shareholders because it enhances the market value of the firm.

Unintended consequences

During 2020 and 2021, many companies, including Microsoft, Boeing, McDonald's, Disney and Best Buy pledged to improve diversity hiring practices and begin DEI training. Further, the hiring of DEI professionals dramatically increased, with more than 60 US companies hiring their first chief diversity officer (Cox & Lancefield, 2021) and LinkedIn displaying over 600 CDO Career Job Postings in 2021 (Bishop-Monroe, Wingender, & Shimerda, 2021). However, between 2022 and 2024, a 40% drop in DEI-related job postings took place (Getaura, 2025; Elias, 2023). Although much attention has been given to these initiatives themselves, it appears that such efforts have not been effectively implemented, and some have actually backfired, causing some to question how dedicated companies actually were to implementing effective programs (Harper, 2023). Given what appears to be a generalized public backlash toward DEI, combined with the effects of the Supreme Court ruling and Presidential executive orders, it is likely that DEI initiatives will face increased scrutiny and legal challenges for which organizations must be prepared.

While much attention has focused on failures of the customer-facing side of the organization (e.g. Bud-light, Disney and Target), other companies such as Walmart, Wells Fargo and Netflix have faced scrutiny for either falsely or faulty implementation of DEI hiring initiatives (Anonymous, 2022). Past baseline scrutiny and social "outrage," over the past four years, hundreds of lawsuits have been filed against major corporations, including Delta Airlines and Wells Fargo (Hood, 2023) as well as Starbucks (Guynn, 2023), challenging their DEI practices. Clearly, the cost – both in terms of money and reputation – will accelerate if DEI initiatives are not well thought out, miss the mark and result in dramatic unintended consequences.

There is often a huge gap in how leaders and employees perceive DEI progress in their companies. For example, a survey by [Cox & Lancefield \(2021\)](#) found that 93% of leaders agreed that the DEI agenda is a top priority, but only 34% believed that it is a strength of their workplace; 80% of HR professionals viewed companies as “going through the motions;” and, while 78% of Black professionals believe senior leaders’ DEI initiatives are well intentioned, 40% “hear more talk than action” and they believe that they have not noticed any material changes to policies or culture. Meanwhile, many CDO officers leave their roles because of a lack of strategic, financial and political support.

Some of these issues may also stem from a lack of top-down goals. According to compensation consulting firm Pearl Meyer, only 3.2% of the companies in the Russell 3000 have at least one diversity goal for at least one top executive ([Wahba, 2021](#)). This is despite DEI joining climate-friendliness as issues where firms are being pressured to prove their actions and results – not least by investors who want to invest in companies that meet environmental, social and governance (ESG) benchmarks.

DEI initiatives require a significant amount of both human and financial capital. However, much like human resource departments themselves, DEI efforts would be considered a cost center within the organization and rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to recuperate the investments needed to both establish them but also maintain them. Because of this, DEI efforts, even if they are producing some or all of the intended outcomes, are viewed as failures and therefore can lead to unintended consequences.

While there can be different viewpoints regarding the success/failure of a given DEI initiative, some emergent categories involve long-range planning, resistance and unintended outcomes. [Dover, Kaiser, & Major \(2019\)](#) suggest that one of the salient factors that can adversely affect the effectiveness of diversity efforts involves the unintended signals that the initiatives often send. That is, the mere presence of diversity initiatives can have unintended consequences through the communication of *fairness* signals, *inclusion* signals and *competence* signals. Initiatives can lead to a presumption of *fairness* for targeted groups, which can make claims of discrimination more difficult to identify and litigate. On the other hand, initiatives can lead to a presumption of unfairness for members of the nontargeted groups – increasing the chances that such people will perceive themselves as victims of discrimination. With regard to *inclusion*, diversity initiatives may increase the attractiveness of organizations to targeted groups who anticipate inclusion, but nontargeted groups may feel a sense of exclusion. Finally, diversity initiatives may signal that targeted groups need special assistance to succeed. Thus, nontargeted groups may perceive them to have less *competence* than their nontargeted (or advantaged) colleagues.

In addition to unintended signals, DEI programs may fail simply because of resistance from the employees themselves. While systemic biases may play a part, common issues seen with any type of organizational change can negatively impact the success of the DEI program. If the program fails to seek buy-in from the employees for changes, the potential exists that employees will never even attempt to gain a shared belief and thus be resistant or adverse to the organizational change. This roadblock can be further intensified when members are not given ample time to complete the change and if the plan does not have ample long-range planning to allow for the basic tenants of change. Further, if the program does not have sufficient long-range planning to allow the basic tenants of change, as posited by [Lewin \(1951\)](#), it will be extremely difficult for organizations to create the motivation to change one’s thoughts and practices; enable individuals time to learn new ways of embracing DEI initiatives as well as support, reinforce and institutionalize change.

Even the use of the words “diversity training” can cause a negative impact on the potential success of the program. While taking time to learn about one another is a

mechanism by which organizations can reduce workplace incivility (Akella & Lewis, 2019), one study found that White men exhibited more stress and anticipated more anti-White discrimination for a company that emphasized their commitment to diversity in recruiting materials than a company that did not mention topics related to DEI. In another example, Laura Morgan, a nurse at Baylor Scott & White hospital in Texas was fired because she refused to take part in “diversity training” because she felt the program was not one of diversity but rather one of admission of unconscious bias (Hanson, 2022). Asare (2019) suggested that developing a creative label for a diversity program can reduce resistance.

DEI efforts can also fail because they were never actually intended to succeed in the first place. Virtue signaling refers to the act of making something public to showcase some sort of moral viewpoint and focuses on the basis of comparison, i.e. showcasing that the speaker has a higher level of morality and thus placing the onus on others to respond with their own stance (Nanay, 2022). Barry Dillar, CEO of Expedia Group, which has long been criticized for its lack of social ideology within its decision-making, even stated, “Most of ESG [environmental, social and governance principles] is virtue signaling. . . [just] glossy reports” (Tobin, 2022). Because virtue signaling is more concerned with seeking status than completing action, DEI initiatives connected to virtue signaling can be particularly harmful because of the disappointment caused by there being no actual outcome, successful or not.

Making diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives effective

To this point, we have discussed not only rationales for DEI initiatives but several reasons for which these initiatives and programs typically fail. Recognizing the importance of these initiatives, and their somewhat unique and uncharted implementations, we now discuss how strategic elements of decision-making processes can improve the chances of success.

Decision-making approaches

DEI programs are not significantly different than any other strategic planning activities. They require a mission, analysis of the environment, decision-making, implementation and evaluation. It is in the decision-making process that organizations can make improvements to their DEI initiatives to improve their chances for success. Though perhaps unorthodox on the surface, the use of devil’s advocacy, dialectical inquiry, six hats and premortem assessment all have the potential to yield true results within the DEI initiative.

Prior to any decision-making about the program itself, it is imperative that the organization determine what the precise mission is of the DEI program, with mission being the purpose of the action and/or the reason for being (Lipton, 1996). Without an appropriate mission, a DEI program is likely to meet the fates explored previously such as with virtue signaling, lack of accountability and unintended discrimination. In contrast, an appropriately designed mission can serve the organization in rallying behind the foundation of the DEI initiative and also as the basis for the strategic planning of said program (Ireland & Hitt, 1992).

Devil’s advocacy. First is the idea of an appropriate devil’s advocate as a means by which DEI programs can be improved. Devil’s advocates are those within the organization who present opposing viewpoints during discussions and are individuals who endeavor to identify problems with the proposed alternatives and suggest reasons why they should not be adopted (Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989). Typically, devil’s advocates emerge from the organization, with varied degrees of popularity, but can also be specifically assigned to act in the role (Meyer, 2000). When acting in a positive manner, a devil’s advocate can provide the organization with fresh perspectives, creative approaches,

differing questions, along with, perhaps most importantly, a measure to avoid arriving at a premature decision (MacDougall & Baum, 1997).

Within the DEI process, the benefits of a devil's advocate can be both practical and beneficial. With a major pitfall of DEI programs being a lack of buy-in from the stakeholders, the use of a devil's advocate can serve to really slow down the process and ensure that people are acting in a rational manner with achievable goals rather than in haste with rushed and emotion-based programs doomed for failure. The devil's advocate can also address the dangers of virtue signaling to ensure that any idea being put forward has the potential to be actionable and not just hyperbole.

While some revel in and specialize in acting as a devil's advocate, within the DEI process finding one to serve in the role could be problematic. As can be seen in a multitude of news reports and social media posts, failing to immediately be on board with DEI initiatives can find one branded as a racist and even cause one to be removed from the organization. For devil's advocacy to work within DEI processes, it is best that the member go willingly into the role, knowing that they are playing a specific role and all involved know the devil's advocate is not necessarily espousing their own personal beliefs.

Dialectical inquiry. Similar in construction to a devil's advocacy, dialectical inquiry plays a role in the decision-making process by introducing conflict through the suggestion of alternate proposals that are feasible, politically viable and credible but rely on different assumptions and then debating the merits of each (Schweiger, Sandberg & Rechner, 1989). Rather than just acting in a critical manner, dialectical inquiry serves to present alternatives and finds the players interacting with one another to examine, critique and ultimately make recommendations on the other player's ideas (Priem & Price, 1991). The goal of dialectical inquiry is for the players to come to a reasonable consensus, resulting in a synthesis of different alternatives, in which all if not most of the players can feel as though their thoughts are included (Bailin & Battersby, 2021).

The use of dialectical inquiry within DEI planning can be highly successful because by its very nature, it requires everyone to be involved in some way as the discussion unfolds. Thus, from the onset, players are able to present their viewpoints, find those who most closely agree with them and work together to move their idea forward. This approach can be particularly effective within larger organizations where it is impractical for everyone to be directly involved in final decision-making processes. Here, individual departments can offer their thoughts and have them represented by upper management who they themselves would then debate the ideas through dialectical inquiry striving to obtain a synthesis of alternate perspectives.

Much like devil's advocacy, dialectical inquiry is not without its pitfalls. Dialectical inquiry requires individuals to have the freedom to express their own opinions as well as the ability to critique others (Mercier, Boudry, Paglieri, & Trouche, 2017). Thus, individuals must also be able to receive criticism on their ideas and be open to others. Issues of DEI are some of the most closely held constructs of an individual (Charmaraman & Grossman, 2010) and therefore it may be exceedingly difficult for some people to embrace what Mercier, Boudry, Paglieri, & Trouche ((2017: 8) called "felicitous conditions" to facilitate constructive dialogue.

Parallel thinking. Drawing from elements included in dialectic inquiry and devils' advocacy, having organizational members examine the issues related to DEI through individual lenses can provide a well-rounded and potentially successful program. As stated by Sherwood (2022), by looking at an idea from numerous, and defined, perspectives, groups can avoid the biases which can result from a singular view or groupthink. Particularly in relationship to DEI, again in which emotions can run high, the use of assigned roles to evaluate and debate the proposed plan can result in the necessary critical thinking which ultimately delivers the highest potential for success.

While several models exist for role play in the decision-making process, the ideas of Edward de Bono and his model for parallel thinking can prove highly effective in the DEI process. Unlike traditional problem-solving approaches, which can result in enhanced conflict and debate rather than successful decision-making, De Bono's parallel thinking promotes participants putting their ideas forward within the context of cooperative exploration, while staying focused on a micro-structured discussion, to find the best solutions (De Bono, 1970).

De Bono's parallel thinking concept is best exemplified in his metaphoric example of the six hats (Bono, 1985). Unlike naturally occurring organizational roles, such as unifier or facilitator, which naturally emerge based on the individual's natural tendency, de Bono's roles are assigned and require the participant to wear the hat that corresponds to the respective perspective. These roles include White hat (facts and figures), Red hat (emotions and feelings), Black hat (what is wrong with the idea), Yellow hat (positive speculation), Green hat (creative and lateral thinking) and Blue hat (control of thinking). It is important to understand that in de Bono's approach, the hats are not distributed, metaphorically or literally, with each of the hats debating their given approach. Rather, several or all members first wear a hat (typically the Blue hat) to start the process and then switch among the varying perspectives, providing all with the same starting point and framework to discuss the problem at hand.

Within DEI planning, the six hat approach could be particularly effective in setting parameters for the decision-making and reducing the potential for individual motivations, external pressures and virtue signaling. De Bono offered that certain activities have certain sequences in which to achieve the best outcomes. The process of identifying potential DEI plans would start by setting the parameters of thoughts and ultimate goal (Blue), then exploring the facts and information (White), creative solutions and challenges faced (Green) and then return to ultimate goal (Blue) to evaluate the ideas against the goal. If the organization had already identified a particular issue related to DEI, the same process would be followed starting with Blue and then White, followed by a discussion of the negative elements of the information (Black), concluding with Green and Blue. The "hat approach" can be used in a multitude of combinations in which to address a variety of issues.

Because the hat approach requires participants to be focused on the approach being used, the overall cohesiveness of the group tends to be higher. Within DEI planning, however, this can prove problematic as it has the potential to exclude intangible elements which might be ultimately necessary to the success of the program. For instance, if attempting to address the lack of inclusion of alternate ability individuals, the inability to discuss emotions and feelings (Red hat) at the time that information is being sought about the issue (White hat) may cause important intangibles to be dropped from the conversation with the proposed idea moving forward only based on tangible and observable elements.

The hat approach could also inadvertently bring forward too much negativity. Particularly within the Black hat stage (focusing on what is wrong with the idea), creating a purposeful moment in which to point out all of the negative aspects of the idea can result in feelings of discouragement, diminished buy-in and even personal attacks (real or imagined) and even discrimination thus potentially engraining the potential DEI issue even further. To address this problem with the de Bono model, Sherwood (2022) suggests using this time as one to look at the issues that would need to be resolved for the idea to be successfully implemented. Though subtle, the Sherwood alteration plays far greater with the people driven aspects of DEI and can allow for those potential intangible aspects to be considered throughout the process.

Project premortem. The final decision-making approach we discuss does not focus on the process itself but rather the actual outcome. While the concept of a postmortem evaluation (or sometimes called "after-action report") has been used in a myriad of situations from military operations to toxicology reports, the concept of a project premortem is a relatively new concept

in which the planning team presents their plan and then imagines that the plan has failed (Klein, Koller, & Lovallo, 2019). Project leaders tend to be overly confident in the future success of their ideas (Meissner, Sibony & Wulf, 2015) and thus are required to look at their plan from the perspective of its potential failure and therefore allow the planning team members to identify weaknesses, potential roadblocks and overzealousness (Klein, 2007). Unlike a postmortem, which presents opportunities to fix things “next time,” a premortem allows the organization to work backwards to thwart flaws before they occur (Kahneman, 2011).

The use of a premortem can yield multiple benefits. First, by hypothesizing what could go wrong, planners can avoid the pitfalls of unintended outcomes. Again, many DEI initiatives fail because, in the end, they disenfranchise some stakeholders (e.g. nontargeted employees). Through the premortem, these outcomes can be seen and the actions leading up to them altered. Likewise, programs that are doomed to failure can be retooled to ensure that the program has forward momentum in keeping with the mission of both the organization and the DEI plan.

Finally, the premortem can alleviate the effects of groupthink. Again, given the sensitive nature and deeply held beliefs associated with DEI work, individuals may be tempted to go along with a plan because of fear of reprisal. Since a premortem explores the potential outcome of the plan, the process itself identifies areas of concern, thus allowing individuals more freedom to speak about the plan and not necessarily for or against it.

Via devil’s advocacy, dialectic inquiry, parallel thinking, or project premortem approaches to decision-making, organizations have a greater opportunity to put forward DEI plans which not only fit today’s societal norms but have a better chance to work. If a DEI initiative does not work then it can do nothing but harm to the organization. Within the strategic process, while decision-making comes well after the establishment of the mission, engaged leadership and corporate culture are also salient factors in all decisions within the organization and thus set the tone for the DEI initiatives to have a greater chance of success.

Moving forward to successful diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives

The importance of diversity within a society has always been present. However, now more than ever, the idea of DEI is at the forefront not just of special interest groups but of all organizations, both large and small. DEI is not just about numbers, emotions, images and slogans: it is about ensuring that the culture of organizations is reflective of societal culture. Beyond this, DEI is about ensuring everyone has the opportunity to be heard and to find their success. By understanding not only what DEI is to organizations but why so often these initiatives fail, organizations can make appropriate decisions to not simply embrace diversity but to truly reflect diversity and attain higher levels of organizational performance.

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